

## HISTORICAL NOTES

# SAN ANDRES

## NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The San Andres Mountains present a curious blank in the annals of southern New Mexico. This rough castellated range was such a barrier to exploration that history swept past it and left these mountains veiled in mystery.

Persistent legends tell of early Spanish gold at the southern end of the range near the present town of Organ. Even as late as 1859 these mountains were little known. Old maps call the range Sierra de Caballo or Sierra Soledad. The San Andres Mountains, named in honor of Saint Andrew the Apostle by early Spanish settlers at the tiny village of Las Padillas, form the western edge of the Tularosa Basin, which contains the White Sands National Monument and the White Sands Missile Range.

Early day Mexicans secured salt in this basin. In the spring a small party would be sent to this isolated plain to dry out salt blocks. In the fall a caravan of heavy wooden-wheeled ox carts would arrive. Loaded with salt, the slow-moving expedition would return to Old Mexico. Old carreta tracks between the mountains and the White Sands have been found. These long wavy lines show that the wooden wheels were worn on their axles. Rains washed mountain silt into the ruts and the sun baked the mud a different color, making the old tracks easy to find. One of these carts complete with cottonwood wheels can be seen today at the nearby National Monument.

The old salt trail did not follow the mountains closely. The salt seekers wanted time to prepare for raiding Apaches who would come screaming from the hills to kill and plunder. Even during the 1850's and 1860's there were numerous clashes in the San Andres region between local militia and Indians. Even today, as you sit in quiet, flower-scented patios the old folks recall in soft-spoken Spanish their pioneer ancestors who wrested this country from the Indians. Bitter feuds developed. The echoes of these life and death struggles can still be heard.

Local people whisper of old mountain legends, yet to be proved but fascinating. There is the story of a bronze church bell cached in a cave under a brush-screened ledge. The bell is said to have been hidden



UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

BUREAU OF SPORT FISHERIES AND WILDLIFE

Refuge Leaflet 416 • October 1968



from raiding Apaches. It has never tolled the faithful to evening services. Then there is the legend of Spanish armor in a long forgotten cave. Quien sabe?

Old Indian campsites and mescal pits show that Apaches and perhaps others before them hunted in the San Andres Mountains. Apache spoons and ladles made from mountain sheep horns hint that tribesmen came to the mountains in search of bighorns. The refuge was established to bring back these rare desert sheep. Under protection, these majestic native animals have been saved from extinction.

To the west of the Sierra San Andres is found the dreaded Jornada del Muerto or Journey of Death. In Spanish days this infamous, waterless plain was used as a detour from El Paso to Albuquerque to avoid dangerous Indian raids along the river road. The refuge boundary touches the eastern edge of this desert sea.

In the 1880's cattlemen moved into the mountains. One of the first operators, the Wildy outfit, ran black cattle from Oregon Pass to Deadman Canyon. These hardy beasts were wild and grazed all the way to the top--they did not see people very often. Eugene Manlove Rhodes wrote of the early day rawhide-tough San Andres ranchers.

Prospectors also roamed these hills. Little is known of these men. They ate venison and sheep and kept to themselves. In the early 1900's a lead mine and mill were constructed in San Andres Canyon. Woodcutters from Las Cruces were hired to cut cedars in nearby San Andrecito Canyon and haul them to the mill.

During the early 1900's, J. H. Gaut, a naturalist of the Biological Survey, a predecessor agency to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, collected birds and mammals in the San Andres Mountains. He reported bears in the range. The bears are gone but mountain lions can still be found. During the 1920's, the well-known biologist J. Stokley Ligon located the San Andres sheep and brought this remnant band to the attention of those who wished to save the bighorn as a precious heritage of living history.

Today the San Andres National Wildlife Refuge covers 88 square miles of the southern San Andres Mountains. The refuge overlays part of the Jornada Experimental Range of the Department of Agriculture on the west and joins the White Sands National Monument and the White Sands Missile Range on the east. Some of the land now in the refuge was a State game refuge from 1926 until 1941, when the Federal refuge was established.

The area is managed to perpetuate bighorn sheep and the native plants they feed upon. In cooperation with the New Mexico Game and Fish Department, special hunts have been held for the numerous native gray mule deer. A list of birds found in this mountain refuge may be secured from the office of the refuge manager, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

---Arthur F. Halloran